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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 03 DHAKA 002298

SIPDIS

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SUBJECT: A/S ROCCA MEETS WITH BANGLADESH PM, MFA OFFICIALS

REF: DHAKA 2264 (EXDIS)

Classified By: Economic Chief David Renz; reason 1.4(d)

1. (C) Summary: In May 12 meetings with Prime Minister Zia and senior MFA officials, Assistant Secretary for South Asia Christina Rocca discussed law and order, governance, terrorism (reftel), democracy, human rights, and religious freedom, as well as regional issues. Alternately downplaying USG concerns and promising stronger actions, Bangladeshi officials sought increased USG technical assistance and support, encouraged passage of legislation for duty-free textile access, and sought USG support for membership in the ASEAN Regional Forum. End summary.

2. (U) A/S Rocca held separate meetings on May 12 with Prime Minister Khaleda Zia, Foreign Minister Morshed Khan, Foreign Affairs Advisor Reaz Rahman, and Foreign Secretary Hemayetuddin. Ambassador and acting political/economic counselor (note taker) accompanied the assistant secretary.

Law and Order; Governance

3. (C) On law and order, BDG officials pointed proudly to improved security in Bangladesh, saying people were no longer afraid to go out. A/S Rocca expressed USG concern over extra-judicial killings and reminded her interlocutors of potential sanctions under US law. The PM informed A/S Rocca there would be a cabinet meeting to look into the issue. That said, the PM and MFA all defended the actions of RAB and the police with the oft repeated defense that the victims were all hardened criminals, the need to address declining law and order justified strong measures, the people supported the government, and, in the PM's words, when you arrest notorious criminals, gun battles are frequent and criminals die. Police are killed too, she said, implying critics should be more concerned about their deaths.

4. (C) A/S Rocca cited USG concern with rising political violence, noting the effect it could have on elections. The foundation of democracy in Bangladesh would be helped by aggressively pursuing political violence. Ambassador Thomas thanked the PM for the BDG's cooperation with the FBI in the Kibria murder investigation. A/S Rocca stressed that it was important that the investigation stand up to international scrutiny. The PM and MFA officials noted USG concerns about political violence but downplayed them, arguing an aggressive free press and vested interests have distorted reality. All sought additional training and assistance to improve police and investigator skills, with the PM specifically requesting forensic training and equipment, including a DNA analysis lab.

5. (C) The Prime Minister stressed the progress she believed Bangladesh has made in addressing governance issues. She pointed to the formation of the Anti-Corruption Commission (ACC), explaining away its slow start as normal organizational delays and expressing confidence that it would produce results in the next six months. The PM acknowledged inefficiencies in government and sought training and assistance programs for improving government efficiency.

6. (C) A/S Rocca welcomed the formation of the ACC but noted it must be given real authority and independence to be effective. In all her meetings, A/S Rocca said that a climate of corruption, uncertain law and order, and weak governance held the potential to undermine Bangladeshi institutions, creating opportunities for extremists to take the country in the wrong direction.

Elections and Democracy

7. (C) A/S Rocca congratulated officials on the conduct of the elections for the mayor of Chittagong, noting Bangladesh's history of free and fair elections and expressing the desire of the USG to see this tradition continued through the next national elections. She said democracy remains a focal point of US policy. She praised Bangladesh's democratic traditions but said the U.S. would continue to voice concerns whenever we see threats to democracy.

8. (C) The PM and MFA officials reiterated their commitment to democracy and welcomed U.S. support of

democratic institutions in Bangladesh. They uniformly expressed their satisfaction with the conduct of the Chittagong elections (if not the outcome; the incumbent opposition candidate won.) Reaz Rahman was more blunt, saying it was a wake-up call for the BNP and gave the opposition Awami League (AL) confidence that it could win elections, which Rahman hopes will translate into AL participation in national elections.

¶9. (C) On opposition proposals for election reform, Reaz Rahman said any attempt to change the system would create more problems than it would solve, saying there was no common ground on the nature of or need for reform. More broadly, he lamented the political polarization of country, saying ways needed to be found to strengthen parliament.

Human Rights and Religious Freedom

¶10. (C) A/S Rocca stressed the need to protect human rights and religious freedom. Our concerns are not just with the Ahmadiyas, she said. She warned that the impression overseas of Bangladesh as a moderate, tolerant society was changing.

¶11. (C) PM Zia assured A/S Rocca that "we are looking after" the issue and there is no problem. It was only a very small group of people who had issues with the Ahmadiyas. She suggested an active, free press creates a distorted view by focusing on a few unfortunate incidents. She also speculated that the AL was trying to use these incidents against the government because they lacked any credible issues of their own.

¶12. (C) The Foreign Minister and Foreign Secretary expanded on these positions, stressing the long history of tolerance in Bangladesh and citing the peaceful, simultaneous celebration of Eid and a major Hindu festival last fall. Saying the BDG did not condone attacks on the Ahmadiyas, they pointed to an April 29 statement by coalition partner Jamaat-e Islami condemning extremist acts against the Ahmadiya's. Acknowledging "one or two instances," of violence against the Ahmadiyas, the Foreign Secretary assured A/S Rocca that the BDG was determined to keep the situation under control.

¶13. (C) The Foreign Minister and Foreign Secretary also asked about the May 11 recommendation of the US Commission on International Religious Freedom to place Bangladesh on a watch list. Without commenting on the commissions report, A/S Rocca pointed out that government actions such as the ban on Ahmadiya publications contributed to perceptions that Bangladesh restricted religious freedoms. Bemoaning the ban, the FM said it was driven by political considerations but said the BDG did not really support it and had asked the Ahmadiyas to challenge it in court. The Foreign Secretary took a different tact, saying some of the publications were incendiary and that the need to protect public security could outweigh the limited restriction imposed by the publication ban.

Textile Tariff Relief

¶14. (C) The PM and MFA officials all sought support for passage of the Trade Act of 2005, which would grant duty free access to Bangladesh textiles and ready made garments. Noting this was an issue for the Congress, A/S Rocca urged Bangladesh not to base its post- Multi-Fiber Arrangement strategy on gaining duty-free access to the U.S., explaining domestic political realities on textiles and the many other competing priorities on trade. Instead, she urged Bangladesh to address the underlying infrastructure and governance issues that undermine Bangladesh's competitive position.

Regional Issues

¶15. The PM and MFA officials sought U.S. support for Bangladesh's bid to join the ASEAN Regional Forum. Bangladesh fits within the regional footprint and has experience in multilateral fora and peacekeeping they pointed out. A/S Rocca noted their request.

¶16. A/S Rocca's interlocutors also asked about U.S. relations with India. A/S Rocca said the U.S. has built strong bilateral relationships with all the countries in the region and wants to continue to work with the region to support democracy. We work closely with India where there are common interests and views, just as we do with Bangladesh, she said. A/S Rocca welcomed news that the SAARC summit would likely be scheduled in November, citing the untapped potential of SAARC to foster political and economic development in the region.

¶17. A/S Rocca has cleared this message.
THOMAS